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Chekhov's "The Darling"

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"Only he that is true can speak the truth."

W. H. Auden

Abstract

This short story concerns a young woman, Olga Semyonovna, or 'Olenka', "who could not exist without loving" some other person (D ; 4). Chekhov perhaps intended to create a parody of the 'good wife' or of a woman with no ideas of her own…a cipher ; what he did create however was a woman who appears almost saintly in her love for and devotion to others ; as Tolstoy has said, "The Darling" is a "story so excellent" because the "effect is unintentional" (D ; 28). This story was Tolstoy's favorite among all of Chekhov's more than three hundred short stories.

Chekhov created a woman whose soul is rather like the moon : it reflects the light of whatever sun it happens to be opposite. Tolstoy has said that this story gives us a woman with "a faculty of devoting herself with her whole being to any one she loves" (D ; 25). While Chekhov intended perhaps the character of Olenka to be a figure of fun, to Tolstoy she is "not absurd, but marvellous and holy" (ibid.). This paper will analyze her character as presented by Chekhov and as perceived by Tolstoy.

1.1 Kukin

Vladimir Nabokov notes that the young woman Lipa, with a group of girls gathering mushrooms in Chekhov's short story "In the Ravine" is among "Chekhov's happy people, naïve gentle people against a background of unhappiness and injustice" (LL ; 271).

The character of Olenka in the short story "The Darling" may be considered a member of this group. But Olenka is quite different in a very singular way : to be really happy, she needs another person to care for and love. Many of Chekhov's innocents are superficially considered to be fools or idiots : happy in their bliss of divine indifference to evil (LL ; 272). They appear unable to take care of themselves in the harsh world in which they find themselves ; they are usually dependents and are therefore largely unable to protect themselves either emotionally or

materially.

Olenka, the young daughter of a retired bureaucrat, we meet while she is sitting on her back porch on a hot summer evening, lost in thought. Rain clouds gather in the evening sky as Kukin, the manager of the local open-air theater, laments the gathering clouds. He is a boarder at her house.

"Again!" he observed despairingly. "It's going to rain again! Rain every day, as though to spite me. I might as well hang myself! It's ruin! Fearful losses every day" (D ; 3). Olenka understands his anxiety. He goes on to complain about the audiences : he offers them real art, "the very best operetta, a dainty masque, first-rate music-hall artists" (D ; 4), but all the public wants is "a clown ; what they ask for is vulgarity" (ibid.). And there is the rain. He moans further about lost ticket sales to a public who seem to dislike what he offers them anyway. This scene in the garden goes on for a succession of three days ; Olenka sits on the back porch while Kukin stands in the garden of the house bleating about the rain in his life. Olenka's feelings for Kukin change : she is touched by his misfortunes : "she grew to love him" (ibid.).

Kukin himself

> was a small thin man, with a yellow face, and curls combed forward on his forehead. He spoke in a thin tenor ; as he talked his mouth worked on one side, and there was always an expression of despair on his face ; yet he aroused a deep and genuine affection in her. She was always fond of some one, and could not exist without loving. In earlier days she had loved her papa, who now sat in a darkened room, breathing with difficulty ; she had loved her aunt who used come every other year from Bryansk ; and before that, when she was at school, she had loved her French master. She was a gentle, soft-hearted, compassionate girl, with mild, tender eyes and very good health. At the sight of her full rosy cheeks, her soft white neck with a little dark mole on it, and the kind naïve smile, which came into her face when she listened to anything pleasant, men thought, "Yes, not half bad," and smiled too, while lady visitors could not refrain from seizing her hand in the middle of a conversation, exclaiming in a gush of delight, "You darling!"
>
> (D ; 5)

Her childlike innocence wins hearts, and this innocence and the need for love prompts her very early one morning to tap on her bedroom window at Kukin as he returns from work at the theater. When he sees her friendly smile at the window, his heart is hers, he proposes and they are soon married. It is worth noting that it also rained on the day and night of Kukin's wedding to the darling. The narrator remarks that Kukin's face "still

retained an expression of despair" (D ; 6).

Chekhov describes their marriage with an expression he uses repeatedly in the story : "They got on very well together" (ibid.). She begins to work in the ticket office at his theater where her "rosy cheeks, her sweet, naive radiant smile, were to be seen now at the office window" (ibid.). Olenka perhaps brightens the otherwise somewhat gloomy atmosphere at the theater by being everywhere and talking positively to everyone. But she still tells the other people there that the audience only wants to see a clown (ibid.), the exact sentiment of her husband Kukin. Chekhov tells us that "what Kukin said about the theatre and the actors she repeated" (ibid.). However, while she adopts Kukin's opinions about the public and their lack of artistic sensibility, she also takes a more serions interest in the theater : "she took part in rehearsals, she corrected the actors, she kept an eye on the behavior of the musicians, and when there was an unfavorable notice in the local paper, she shed tears, and then went to the editor's office to set things right" (D ; 6-7). So it seems the darling is more than a mere parrot of Kukin's ideas, more than her husband's helper ; she 'corrects' the actors, which indicates someone who does not lack ideas or self-confidence ; she defends the value of the shows her husband puts on to the editor of the local paper. She is no shy, weak woman bereft of ideas ; she is an active, intelligent and most importantly, a compassionate and fully alive woman. She is much more than a mere parody of a good wife. By building such psychological complexity into Olga, one feels Chekhov is taking her seriously, not in any sense does he see her as a parody ; so Tolstoy then may be mistaken in assuming Chekhov meant to make her a joke. His artistic purpose here may rather have been to portray a woman in the pursuit of love and so someone on a quest to find herself and a meaning to life.

Just as a side note on Olenka's character, because she got along so well with the actors at her husband's theater, she sometimes lent them money, which they then refuse to repay. She shed a few tears, says the narrator, but she "did not complain to her husband" (ibid.). This character trait suggests a person who is intelligent enough to realize that any complaint to her husband would be a further distraction to an already very worried man. This shows great sensitivity and insightful awareness of another's feelings.

As Olenka grows happier and stouter, her husband becomes thinner and more worried about business. At night now he coughs and she cares for him with gentle compassion. She gives him "hot raspberry tea or lime-flower water," she labors "to rub him with eau-de-Cologne and to wrap him in her warm shawls" (ibid.). When he leaves on a trip to Moscow to collect new actors, "without him she could not sleep" (ibid.). This seems like genuine love.

Chekhov chooses a most humble metaphor to describe Olenka's feelings when her husband is gone : she felt like one of the "hens, who are awake all night and uneasy when

the cock is not in the hen-house" (ibid.). Some readers of Chekhov feel this kind of language indicates he sees her as a traditional Russian female protagonist ; someone who "knows her place" as a woman. This could not be more incorrect. The metaphor here described is not one having to do with physical unease because of a lack of male protection, but a feeling of unity and completeness when the male is present—of rightness and wholeness. The hens are not complete without the rooster ; Olenka is not complete without her man.

On his trip to Moscow, Kukin dies. When she gets the telegram and realizes her loss, we hear, "My darling!" sobbed Olenka. "Vanitchka, my precious, my darling! Why did I ever meet you? Why did I know you and love you! Your poor heart-broken Olenka is all alone without you!" (D ; 8). Some critics think this stereotyped language, but Chekhov here captures the exact feelings of a bereaved man or woman. He does this by having her refer to herself in the third-person, but this is further deepened by having her call him 'darling,' exactly what he, and everyone else in the story, calls her. Such equality, he is her darling and she is his darling, causes us to realize that she has lost a part of herself.

1.2 Pustovalov

Olenka mourns Kukin for three months. But as in many of Chekhov's stories, certain characters seem to realize that life is a process that must go on. One day, as she is walking home from church, she finds herself walking beside a neighbor, Andreitch Pustovalov, a timber merchant. He offers her words of sympathy and compassion at her loss, then sees her home and the next day she realizes that "she heard his sedately dignified voice, and whenever she shut her eyes she saw his dark beard. She liked him very much" (D ; 9). They become acquainted and on one visit to her "He did not stay long, only about ten minutes, and he did not say much, but when he left, Olenka loved him—loved him so much that she lay awake all night in a perfect fever" (D ; 10). The next morning she sends for the old woman who is acting as a go-between ; the match is soon arranged.

We hear again the refrain, "They got on very well together" (ibid.). In the timber merchant's office she takes an active part in the affairs of her new husband, just as she had at the theater. She now makes up accounts and books orders when her husband is away from the office on business. She talks to customers and friends largely about the timber business and the rising price of freight haulage, prices of wood and the quality and the different cuts of timber. "It seemed to her that she had been in the timber business for ages and ages, and that the most important and necessary thing in life was timber ; and there was something intimate and touching to her in the very sound of words such as 'baulk,' 'post,' 'beam,' 'pole,' 'scantling,' 'batten,' 'lath,' 'plank,' etc." (ibid.).

She even dreams of "perfect mountains of planks and boards, and long strings of wagons, carting timber somewhere far away" (ibid.). In this dream, Olenka has a startling vision : "a whole regiment of six-inch beams forty feet high, standing on end, was marching upon the timber-yard ; that logs, beams, and boards knocked together with the resounding crash of dry wood, kept falling and getting up again, piling themselves on each other" (D ; 11). This dream may or may not be an allusion to Shakespeare, but the image of boards marching and knocking together and falling over each other is clearly meant as a comic touch.

With her second husband, the narrator again mentions that "Her husband's ideas were hers" (ibid.). He prefers to stay at home on holidays—so does she ; he does not care for entertainments, neither does she. Her friends urge her to come to the theater with them, or to the circus. She replies, "We have no time for nonsense. What's the use of these theatres?" (ibid.).

Many readers of Chekhov feel that her sentiment, "What's the use of theatres?" indicates either that she is so shallow or forgetful or simply so thick that she cannot remember her once great love for the theater when she was married to Kukin. This seeming forgetfulness of her former passion for the theater can be seen in another way. Her love is local and particular at the same time that it is universal and general. Her need to love springs from a universal process and the local expression of this urge changes with the object of her love. She probably remembers quite well her first husband and their life together ; however, now she is concerned only with Pustovalov and timber. She has not betrayed her former self at all ; she is simply expressing her new love with all its priorities. To love means to forget the self, and that's what Olenka is constantly doing : this is why she is among Chekhov's happy characters.

Chekhov believed, perhaps because he was a medical doctor, that life is characterized by process. Of course, each individual life has an ending, but life in the larger sense, the universal source from which love springs, is a process that continues in a forward movement. This may explain why Chekhov left the endings of his stories open, since no story has a real ending, even though individual characters may disappear, as they do in life. It is essential to a clear understanding of Chekhov to keep this idea of ongoing process in mind.

The narrator notes that Olenka and Pustovalov used to walk side by side "with softened faces" (ibid.), after they returned from mass. They ate well and once a week they would go to the baths together and return, again side by side, "both red in the face" (D ; 12). It is natural then that when Pustovlov goes away to buy timber in a far-off district, Olenka "missed him dreadfully, lay awake and cried" (ibid.). Being so lonely, she welcomes the company of a young veterinary surgeon in the military, who rents the lodge on their

property as Kukin once had done. His name is Smirnin and he sometimes visits her in the evenings to play cards and chat. Smirnin is married, though separated from his wife, and he has a little boy. The narrator comments that Smirnin's wife had been unfaithful to him and this caused their break up ; he "hated her" (ibid.), but would send her money every month to care for their son. Olenka feels sorry for him. With Olenka, as we know, initial compassion is always a prelude to deeper feelings of love. She is concerned for him and advises him to return to his wife ; to forgive her for "the sake of your son" (D ; 13) ; to care for and be with the boy. Her concern is genuine and her advice as given is sedate and dignified, "with the same reasonableness, in imitation of her husband" (D ; 12).

When Pustovalov returns she tells him all about Smirnin and his cares. They discuss the little boy, then, "by some strange connection of ideas" they approach the holy ikons in the room, fall on their knees together, and pray to God to give them children. This prayer will be realized for Olenka, but not in the way she expects.

They live together for six years "quietly and peaceably in love and complete harmony" (D ; 13). But this happiness does not last ; Pustovalov goes out into the cold one day without his cap, is taken ill and dies four months later. Again Olenka is a widow and again she wails to herself, "I've nobody, now you've left me, my darling" (ibid.). She mourns him deeply for six months (twice the amount of time she grieved for Kukin) ; she "hardly ever went out, except to church, or her husband's grave, and led the life of a nun" (ibid.). Probably because she is older now than when she had been married to Kukin, she feels the death of Pustovalov much more deeply, but gradually, she begins to go out more ; she drinks tea in her garden with the veterinary surgeon ; she begins to take an interest in veterinary medicine and she now feels "the health of domestic animals ought to be as well cared for as the health of human beings" (D ; 14).

The narrator observes that "It was evident that she could not live a year without some sort of attachment, and found new happiness in the lodge" (ibid.). She begins to repeat his words, and their secret is soon known to everyone, "for Olenka could not keep a secret" (ibid.). This is not a negative but a positive trait in her character ; she is so honest and open with everyone that a lie would be impossible in her world. It is why she is the darling. The narrator explains that "everything she did was so natural" (ibid.), that no one ever thought ill of her.

Since Smirnin is in the Russian army, they often have officers as visitors and Olenka is not shy about discussing "cattle plague,...the foot and mouth disease, and the municipal slaughter-houses" (ibid.). Sadly, Smirnin is embarrassed by her attempt to take part in his life. He scolds her that she does not know what she is talking about, and she pleads in return, "But, Voloditchka, what am I to talk about?" (ibid.). "And with tears in her eyes she would embrace him, begging him not to be angry, and they were both happy" (D ; 15).

This happiness does not last because Smirnin is sent with the army to Siberia. She is left alone again :

> Now she was absolutely alone. Her father had long been dead, and his armchair lay in the attic, covered with dust and lame of one leg. She got thinner and plainer, and when people met her in the street they did not look at her as they used to, and did not smile to her ; evidently her best years were over and left behind, and now a new sort of life had begun for her, which did not bear thinking about.
>
> (D ; 16)

The narrator then makes the following judgment :

> And what was worst of all, she had no opinions of any sort. She saw the objects about her and understood what she saw, but could not form any opinion about them, and did not know what to talk about. And how awful it is not to have any opinions!...When she had Kukin, or Pustovalov, or the veterinary surgeon, Olenka could explain everything, and give her opinion about anything you like, but now there was the same emptiness in her brain and in her heart as there was in her yard outside.
>
> (ibid.)

The simile at the end of this passage is worthy of a second look. Her yard/heart once contained people, now both are empty. This does not reflect a lack in her, but in her environment. In other words, it is not because she is incapable of thought or deep reflection at this point in the story that she has no ideas or opinions ; there is a quite different cause : it is because she has no animus, no motivating purpose in her world. Her vocation is other people.

"How rapidly time passes!" exclaims the narrator. Olenka's house begins to rust and fall to pieces. "Olenka herself had grown plain and elderly" (ibid.). She thinks mostly of the past and often "a tender ache in her heart" (D ; 17) would pass and tears would come to her eyes. But "this was only for a minute, and then the emptiness again and the sense of the futility of life" (ibid.). A black kitten rubs against her, purring, but "Olenka was not touched by these feline caresses. That was not what she needed. She wanted a love that would absorb her whole being, her whole soul and reason—that would give her ideas and

an object in life, and would warm her old blood" (ibid.).

1.3 The little boy with the big cap

Olenka is "dumfounded" (ibid.) to find Smirnin, the veterinary surgeon, at her front gate one hot July day. He is grey-headed and dressed as a civilian. "She suddenly remembered everything. She could not help crying and letting her head fall on his breast without uttering a word, and in the violence of her feeling she did not notice how they both walked into the house and sat down to tea" (ibid.). Smirnin tells her that he intends to settle in the area for good ; that he has reconciled with his wife ; and that his little boy needs to go to school. The boy and his mother are at the local hotel ; Olenka immediately offers her own house to them. She refuses any rent. She will live in the nearby lodge.

Olenka has the roof painted and the walls whitewashed. She walks about the yard, her heart is uplifted ; "beaming with her old smile... she was brisk and alert as though she had waked from a long sleep" (D ; 18). The wife and little boy arrive ; he is named Sasha and he's ten years old.

He's "small for his age, blue-eyed, chubby, with dimples in his cheeks..." and he has "a gay, joyous laugh" (ibid.). He shows an interest in her kitten and Olenka begins to talk to him. And she immediately begins to fall in love for the fourth and last time : "Her heart warmed and there was a sweet ache in her bosom, as though the boy had been her own child", comments the narrator (D ; 19).

In the evenings as he sits at the table studying, she looks at him with "deep tenderness and pity" (ibid.). She murmurs to herself, "You pretty pet! —my precious!...Such a fair little thing, and so clever" (ibid.). Sasha reads aloud his lesson, "An island is a piece of land which is entirely surrounded by water" (ibid.) and Olenka repeats, "An island is a piece of land" (ibid.). The narrator remarks that "this was the first opinion to which she gave utterance with positive conviction after so many years of silence and dearth of ideas" (ibid.).

Before, Olenka repeated opinions ; now she repeats facts. Now she has ideas again and in the evenings she talks to Sasha's parents about his school life and how going to the high school will make it possible for him to become a doctor or lawyer in the future.

Sasha begins going to high school ; a little later his mother departs to stay with her sister in another town ; Sasha's father is often away inspecting cattle, so it begins to seem to Olenka that Sasha is "entirely abandoned" (ibid.). This is in character for Olenka for she cannot conceive of a love that is partial, a love that comes and goes. To her, love is a daily necessity. Accordingly, he moves into her lodge and she fixes up a little room for him there. Olenka had lived with Pustovalov for six happy years ; she has six happy months

with Sasha at the lodge—the narrator does not say why.

Their daily routine is the same and it is profoundly real. Every morning she comes into his bedroom to wake him ; she is always sorry to wake him :

> "Sashenka," she would say mournfully, get up, darling. It's time for school." He would get up, dress and say his prayers, and then sit down to breakfast, drink three glasses of tea, and eat two large cracknels and half a buttered roll. All this time he was hardly awake and a little ill-humoured in consequence. "You don't quite know your fable, Sashenka," Olenka would say, looking at him as though he were about to set off on a long journey. "What a lot of trouble I have with you! You must work and do your best, darling, and obey your teachers."
>
> "Oh, do leave me alone!" Sasha would say.
>
> Then he would go down the street to school, a little figure, wearing a big cap and carrying a satchel on his shoulder. Olenka would follow him noiselessly.
>
> "Sashenka!" she would call after him, and she would pop into his hand a date or a caramel. When he reached the street where the school was, he would feel ashamed of being followed by a tall, stout woman ; he would turn round and say : "You'd better go home, auntie. I can go the rest of the way alone. " She would stand still and look after him fixedly till he had disappeared at the school-gate.
>
> (D ; 20-21)

Their love for each other is deeply touching and Chekhov has managed to capture it in very simple and direct language. The detail of the caramel she presses into his hand each day is characteristic of Chekhov. The boy's embarrassment about his 'auntie' is psychologically real ; another telling detail. It is easy to see why Tolstoy admired this story so much.

But what Tolstoy really admired in Chekov's story is the feelings of love Olenka has for those close to her. She is much more than a figure of fun, much more than an example of what the ideal woman should be from a male chauvinist viewpoint, much more than what most superficial readings of this story suggest. Her love has evolved from romantic attachment to a new type of selfless love. In the boy she has found the sort of love she has always sought :

> Ah, how she loved him! Of her former attachments not one had been so deep ; never had her soul surrendered to any feeling so spontaneously, so disinterestedly, and so joyously as now that her maternal instincts were aroused. For this little boy with the dimple in his cheek and the big school cap, she would have given her whole life, she would have given it with joy and tears of tenderness. Why? Who can tell why?
>
> (D ; 21)

Joy and tears of tenderness raise this love to levels sublime. This is what Tolstoy admired, not her obedience, her submissiveness, nor her adoption of the characteristics and opinions of her love. That her love for the small boy is disinterested suggests that it is a true love and deeply felt.

Now she smiles and even beams at other people ; now she has ideas and things to talk about. Now people call her 'darling' again. She would talk to them about school : how difficult the lessons were, about the teachers, the lessons, the school books, about how it was too much for "a little chap" (ibid.).

After school, their evening routine would begin with a three o'clock dinner. After dinner they "learned their lessons together and cried" (ibid.). When she put him to bed, she would spend a long time saying prayers for him and making the sign of the cross over him. Then she would go to bed and dream of his future. What a brilliant doctor he would be. How he would have a big house and carriage ; how he would get married and have children.

Sometimes at night there would be a loud knocking at the front gate and Olenka would feel afraid that Sasha's mother had sent for him from Harkov, but usually it was the veterinary surgeon returning from the club. Then she would exclaim, "Well, thank God!"

> And gradually the load in her heart would pass off, and she would feel at ease. She would go back to bed thinking of Sasha, who lay sound asleep in the next room, sometimes crying out in his sleep :
>
> "I'll give it you! Get away! Shut up!"
>
> (D ; 22)

And so the story stops. Many readers, especially those from the US and England, are puzzled by Chekhov ; his stories seem to have no proper ending. They just stop. Virginia Woolf has noted, "Our first impressions of Chekhov are not of simplicity but of bewilderment" (CR ; Vol. 1 ; 175). Many of the stories are like a tune that "had stopped without the

expected chords to close it. These stories are inconclusive" (CR ; Vol. 1 ; 176). And this inconclusiveness is difficult and irritating for many readers who expect the classic beginning, middle, end schema of the short story. But with Chekhov, we are confronted with a different type of consciousness. Virginia Woolf also observes of Chekhov's method that what "at first seemed so casual, inconclusive, and occupied with trifles, now appears the result of an exquisitely original taste, choosing boldly, arranging infallibly, and controlled by an *honesty* for which we can find no match save among the Russians themselves" (CR ; Vol. 1 ; 177 ; emphasis mine). It is Chekhov's honesty that allows us to interpret his stories and understand his characters even through the "coarse medium" (VWE ; Vol. 2 ; 247) of translation, the distance in time and the barriers raised by culture.

1.4 Formulating the questions correctly, not providing answers

In a letter to Maria Kiselyova, Chekhov wrote, "Literature is accepted as an art because it depicts life as it actually is. Its aim is the truth, unconditional and honest" (L &T ; 62). His honesty and his recording the truth of what he observed deserve to be recognized as two of his major characteristics as a writer. Chekhov admitted that it was impossible to figure this life out ; all he tried to do was formulate questions about the truth ; he felt it was the duty of each reader to find the answers to the questions he posed.
This is the spirit in which "The Darling" should be approached. While it is true, as Simon Karlinsky comments, that :

> In "The Darling," we are shown a woman who by choice gives up all her individual qualities and derives whatever existence or dimensions she may possess from the males in her life. Chekhov intended her as a humorous creation, but Lev Tolstoy saw in her the embodiment of some of his own most cherished notions about what a woman should be.
>
> (L & T ; 21)

Those who misread this story simply make the mistake of not going deeply enough into it. On one level, it is probably true that Tolstoy preferred traditional women, meaning those who were devoted to their husbands. But on a higher level, Chekhov is asking questions about what love is, not what a woman should or should not be in relation to men. It is well to remember that Olenka finally fixes upon a young child as someone to love, not a grown man, where romantic attachment would weaken the quality and beauty of the relationship. Tolstoy has said of her, "The Darling, with her faculty of devoting herself with her whole

being to any one she loves, is not absurd, but marvelous and holy" (D ; 25). This loss of self in the service to and life of another is an expression of spiritual grace, not the absurdities of an idiot. Chekhov was asking straightforward questions about love. How much should we give of ourselves to those we love? When is love real and when is it illusion? What is, finally, the real nature of love? How is it expressed and what does it look like in everyday experience? To study the character of Olenka is to learn part of the answer.

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